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EPA wants role in Rico cleanup

By Nate Thompson
Journal Staff Writer

The town of Rico will be making a huge decision in the next couple of months.

Town leaders must decide what they think the state and federal government should do about the lead-contaminated soils left from old mine tailings.

However, as the town found out last week, the Environmental Protection Agency wants to maintain a certain level of proprietorship over how that cleanup takes place.

At a Feb. 11 town meeting, EPA Region 8 officials told a packed town hall that the high lead findings - made public in November - have resulted in the EPA's decision to start the cleanup as soon as possible.

Ted Linnert, Region 8 community involvement coordinator, said the town has to decide whether they want the EPA to start a "time-critical removal" that would free up federal funds to start work this summer.

The town is also considering a voluntary cleanup project headed by the Atlantic Richfield Co.

ARCO is the potentially responsible party for the work and would enter into an agreement with the town and land developers such as Rico Renaissance and Rico Properties.

The *Denver Post* reported that the EPA hasn't ruled out listing Rico as a Superfund site.

But ARCO's involvement is the part of the cleanup scenario that has the EPA a little worried, Linnert said.

"We know ARCO and they do good work - they've been in this position before," Linnert said via telephone at his Denver office. "The only thing the EPA would like is to ensure there is some enforcement system in place."

If the town of Rico enters a voluntary agreement with ARCO, there could be some enforcement loopholes, he said.

But the town's attorney, Eric Heil, said at this point he doubts there are any enforcement issues.

"The state health department would have to sign off on any voluntary agreements," Heil said Friday, of draft application that has already been submitted to the state.

ARCO spokesperson Dave McCarthy said Monday that the state health department - and other interested parties involved in the voluntary cleanup application - could conceivably say how much EPA monitoring is needed.

"I think our track record for cleanup speaks for itself," McCarthy said, maintaining that if ARCO does the work, it will likely be more comprehensive, less costly and finished sooner than if EPA is overly involved.

Nevertheless, the EPA wants to be a part of the cleanup process and speculates that what will likely happen is the town will ask the EPA to take care of the most contaminated sites first, Linnert said.

The EPA would then enlist ARCO to clean up sites with lead levels under 1,000 parts per million.

A sampling of properties in Rico last year showed 47 of 54 sites had lead levels over 500 ppm. And 29 of those properties had levels over 1,000 ppm. The levels alone don't represent a risk, but an EPA toxicologist said at the town meeting, that contaminated soil can be a concern when it turns to dust.

And that risk is one of the reasons the EPA wants to get started cleaning up the worst sites - with levels well over 3,000 ppm, Linnert said - including a site near the Dolores river and east of town that has lead content around 91,000 ppm.

That latter number means the soil is 9.1 percent lead, Heil said.

"The numbers are nothing new," Heil continued, explaining that the town became aware of high lead levels after a study was done in 1995.

Nevertheless, the town will be discussing its options at future Town Board meetings.

The good news, Heil said, is the town is getting free help from a regional Hazard Substance Resource Center in Lakewood. The center is a nonprofit group that enlists university and other resources in Colorado to help towns like Rico understand the technicalities of environmental cleanup.

"We definitely need the technical advice," he said. "The town doesn't have any engineers."

The cleanup will include the removal of 12 to 18 inches of topsoil. Any vegetation, soil and other structures that may be impacted will be replaced. However, participation in the soil removal project is voluntary. The decision is left to the property owner.

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